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Guest Editorial

Subalternity, Subjectivity & the Power of Fragmented Voices

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When we organised this seminar at Bandwan Mahavidyalaya under the theme *'Fragmented Voices: Subalternism & Subjectivity in Contemporary Literature'*, our hope was to have academics and scholars reflect on the persistence of silence, marginality and representation in the world of letters. Contemporary literature, whether in the form of novels, poetry, drama or digital expressions such as memes, increasingly concerns itself with fractured identities, voices from the periphery and the complex negotiations between power and powerlessness. In this regard, the terms 'subalternity' and 'subjectivity' become crucial, and one must recognise that these are not mere academic jargon but essential conceptual tools that allow us to uncover the dynamics of silence and speech, of representation and erasure, of identity and voice. This editorial seeks to contextualise these terms, explain their relevance and illustrate how they express the struggles of marginal communities to enter the literary mainstream. In doing so, it also gestures towards the broader ethical and political questions that literature must confront in our present time.

Understanding Subalternity as the Politics of the Margins

Subalternity as a conceptual framework derives its intellectual genealogy from Antonio Gramsci who, in his *Prison Notebooks* (1971), used the term 'subaltern classes' to refer to groups excluded from hegemonic power structures. From Gramsci's perspective, subaltern groups lacked the means to make their interests universally heard because dominant ideologies suppressed or co-opted their voices. Later, in the South Asian context, the Subaltern Studies Collective – scholars such as Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee and Shahid Amin – adopted the term to reinterpret history from below. Their central argument was that the narratives of colonial and nationalist elites had overshadowed the consciousness and agency of peasants, workers and other marginalised groups. Perhaps the most influential intervention came from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose essay *'Can the Subaltern Speak?'* (1988) famously questioned whether subaltern subjects – particularly women in postcolonial societies – can ever achieve genuine representation. For Spivak, the voice of the subaltern is always mediated, distorted or appropriated by elite discourse. The subaltern cannot simply 'speak' into the archives of literature or history; rather, their speech is filtered through structures of knowledge and power that systematically silence them.

In literature, then, subalternity signifies more than economic deprivation. It denotes the condition of being excluded from frameworks of representation, of being spoken for rather than speaking. The challenge for contemporary authors and critics is to recognise and acknowledge these silences and to attempt, however imperfectly, to create spaces where subaltern voices may resonate.

Understanding Subjectivity as the Inner Life of the Marginalised

If subalternity is concerned with structural marginalisation, then subjectivity points us towards the lived experience of individuals. Subjectivity refers to the way individuals perceive, feel and articulate their own existence. It emphasises agency, interiority and the multiplicity of

perspectives through which life is experienced. In literary studies, the exploration of subjectivity complicates the notion that marginalised individuals are simply passive victims. Even within oppressive conditions, individuals interpret, resist and narrate their own lives in ways that do not always align with dominant representations. This self-articulation finds a crucial place in literature. For instance, Dalit autobiographies in India – such as Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003) or Bama's *Karukku* (1992) – are not only works of social critique; they foreground the subjectivity of the marginalised narrator who asserts the dignity of individual and personal memory against collective erasure. In a similar vein, African-American literature – from Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* (1845) to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) – insists on exploring the psychic depth and emotional complexity of people who had been historically reduced to stereotypes.

Thus, subjectivity serves as a counterpoint to subalternity. While subalternity reminds us of silencing and exclusion, subjectivity reminds us of the irrepressible interior lives of marginalised communities, lives that demand recognition in their full richness.

Function of Literature as a Space for Fragmented Voices

Contemporary literature has become increasingly attentive to fragmented voices – voices that resist smooth narratives and speak in broken idioms, hybrid tongues or experimental forms. In this regard, fragmentation is not a weakness but a mode of resistance. It enables the acknowledgement of experiences belonging to marginalised communities which cannot otherwise be fully captured by linear, authoritative storytelling. This is evident in diasporic literature, indigenous literature and feminist literature. For example, in diasporic writing, authors such as Salman Rushdie (*Midnight's Children*, 1981), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, 2006) and Jhumpa Lahiri (*Interpreter of Maladies*, 1999) regularly employ fragmented narratives to reflect the dislocations of migration and identity. Similarly, writers of indigenous literature, including Mahasweta Devi and N. Scott Momaday (*House Made of Dawn*, 1968), invoke myths, oral traditions and non-linear storytelling to challenge Eurocentric literary norms. The deployment of fragmented forms such as letters, diaries, vignettes and multiple narrators allows writers to reveal the multiplicity of marginalised subjectivities.

Thus, fragmentation enables literature to mirror the lived realities of communities whose histories have been interrupted by colonisation, racism or gender oppression. By refusing closure, such literature insists that their histories remain unfinished and continue to demand justice and recognition.

A Dialogue between Subalternism and Subjectivity

Having delineated the conceptual contours of both subalternity and subjectivity, it becomes imperative to inquire into the manner in which these two categories intersect and negotiate with one another within the domain of literature. The dialectical tension between the two can be analytically illuminating. On the one hand, the framework of subalternity cautions us against the naïve assumption that marginalised subjects can simply "speak" and be heard, for their voices are invariably mediated, refracted or even subsumed within dominant discursive regimes. On the other hand, the emphasis on subjectivity foregrounds the fact that individuals and communities, even under conditions of systemic silencing, continually articulate forms of agency, memory and identity that actively contest and resist erasure.

When situated in dialogic relation, subalternity and subjectivity are able to guard against the dangers of theoretical absolutism. An exclusive emphasis on subalternity risks reducing marginalised communities to the status of voiceless victims who have been permanently silenced, thereby perpetuating the very epistemic violence it seeks to dismantle. Conversely, a sole focus on subjectivity may obscure, or even neglect, the pervasive structural and systemic forces that delimit, mediate and constrain subaltern self-expression. Literary texts that negotiate both paradigms – recognising the operations of silencing while simultaneously foregrounding the agency, memory and embodied experience of marginalised subjects – produce a form of representation that is not only epistemologically attentive but also politically generative. For instance, in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* (1978), we see the character of the

Adivasi woman Dopdi as both a subaltern figure who has been subjected to state violence and also as a subject who is able to assert her agency in her final act of defiance. Similarly, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* reflects how the trauma of slavery renders speech nearly impossible while also depicting the struggle to reclaim subjectivity through storytelling, memory and community.

Relevance in Contemporary Literary Contexts

So, why does this discussion continue to hold significance today? The reason is that silences remain deeply entrenched within our contemporary world. Refugees, stateless peoples, Dalits, tribal peoples, racial minorities, queer individuals and women across diverse socio-political contexts continue to encounter systemic erasure (Spivak, 1988). The operations of global capitalism, in conjunction with the pervasive reach of digital media, amplify certain privileged voices while simultaneously muting or marginalising others (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Even within spaces that identify as progressive or emancipatory, entrenched hierarchies of representation frequently endure, thereby reproducing asymmetries of power (Fraser, 2000).

In this regard, contemporary literature emerges as a critical site of resistance and intervention. Dalit literature in India, for instance, reclaims dignity and human worth through acts of self-narration that challenge hegemonic social orders (Valmiki, 2003; Bama, 1992). African, Caribbean and Indigenous literatures disrupt colonial archives by reviving oral traditions, mythic structures and collective memory (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Brathwaite, 1984). Queer writing insists upon non-normative subjectivities that destabilise heteronormative binaries and open discursive spaces for alternative forms of identity and desire (Butler, 1990). Likewise, digital narratives and social media storytelling provide new platforms through which marginalised voices circumvent traditional cultural and institutional gatekeepers, though these forms of expression remain vulnerable to commodification, co-optation and surveillance within neoliberal economies of attention (Dean, 2009).

The critical challenge, then, is to ensure that these diverse voices are not merely attached to existing frameworks as symbolic tokens of inclusion. Instead, they must be recognised as epistemologically and politically generative forces that actively reshape our conceptualisations of literature, history and, indeed, of humanity itself.

Reconceptualising Reading as Ethical Practice

As readers, critics and academics, it becomes imperative to cultivate an ethics of reading that remains acutely attentive to the intertwined categories of subalternity and subjectivity. Such an orientation demands a disposition of humility: an acknowledgment that no act of representation can ever be exhaustive, that the voices encountered within texts are frequently mediated through dominant discursive structures, and that silence itself may constitute a profound and deliberate mode of expression.

Correspondingly, this ethics entails a responsibility: the responsibility to amplify marginalised voices without collapsing them into frameworks of appropriation, to foster interpretive and pedagogical spaces where fragmented, hybrid and non-linear narratives are valued on their own terms, and to recognise literature not as a neutral domain of aesthetic pleasure but as a contested site of political struggle and cultural negotiation.

Thus, in reading, teaching and writing about contemporary literature, we inevitably participate in what might be called a politics of recognition. Each interpretive act implicitly affirms whose stories are deemed significant, whose suffering is acknowledged as historically meaningful, and whose joy or resilience is accorded the dignity of celebration. To approach literature through the combined lens of subalternism and subjectivity is therefore not merely an intellectual choice but a normative commitment to a more just and inclusive literary practice – one that resists erasure while foregrounding agency, memory and lived experience.

Conclusion: Fragmented Narratives and Marginal Agency

The metaphor of "fragmented voices" underscores the recognition that literature does not constitute a single harmonious melody but rather a chorus of multiple, uneven and at times discordant voices. The discourse of subalternism foregrounds the structural mechanisms of

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exclusion that continue to silence many of these voices, while the discourse of subjectivity highlights the irreducible richness and persistence of those who continue to articulate their existence in spite of historical erasure.

In the realm of contemporary literature, the convergence of these two concepts enables a more nuanced apprehension of both the struggles and the creative affirmations of marginalised communities. It underscores that literature cannot be confined to the realm of aesthetics alone but must equally be understood as an ethical and political practice. Thus, literature concerns itself with the critical question of who is entitled to narrate the story of our collective humanity.

In the following articles, the contributors to this volume have explored these issues across a wide range of literary and cultural contexts. They examine, among other themes, the persistence of silences in subaltern histories, the assertion of subjectivity in marginalised narratives, and the use of fragmented forms as strategies of resistance. Taken together, these essays demonstrate that contemporary literature is not merely about aesthetic innovation but about negotiating urgent ethical and political questions of voice, representation and recognition.

Our responsibility, then, as readers and educators, is to listen attentively, to read generously and to allow the fragmented voices we encounter to remain in their complexity rather than being assimilated into artificial unities. They must be preserved as they appear – resistant, heterogeneous and alive. Only under such conditions can literature realise its democratic potential: not as a mere mirror of dominant culture, but as an archive of those who have historically been excluded from its frame.

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